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AUTHOR Carson, Robert C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews some of the research findings relating to the issue of personalism versus situationism in the psychology of personality. The recurrent controversy regarding the relative importance of situations, personal dispositions, and interactions between these is addressed with a focus on the manner in which persons perceive, construe, and subjectively quantify the signals coming to them from other persons in their life-space. The possible idiosyncracies of persons in their construing of other people and their behavior are seen as promising means of understanding person-by-situation interaction in the determination of complex social behavior. (SJL)

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# Phenomenological Implications of Interactionism in the Study of Interpersonal Relations*

Robert C. Carson

Duke University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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The psychology of personality is once again in the throes of a recurrent controversy regarding the relative importance of situations, personal dispositions, and proposed interactions between these as determining individual behavior. I say "once again" because, as recently demonstrated by Ekehammar (1974), the problem has a very long history in psychology--as does the idea that the true state of affairs is interactional and essentially phenomenological in character. The reasons for the chronicity of the controversy appear to be intimately tied to differing methodological styles of researchers in the personality field, some emphasizing correlational and some experimental approaches, along the lines of what Cronbach (1957) has described as the "two disciplines of scientific psychology." As pointed out by Bowers (1973), among others, correlational and experimental methods are selectively blind, respectively, to situational and dispositional influences on behavior, and--as widely misunderstood--neither approach has a monopoly on the understanding of causation at the theoretical level, causation being, at base, a construct applied to empirical relationships of whatever source.

It would seem that the inherent biasing effects of psychology's two disciplines has until fairly recently discouraged both empirical and explicit conceptual

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exploitation of the widespread evidence of person-by-situation interactions occurring in the world around us, including in that portion of it comprising the psychological literature since the introduction and widespread use of factorial designs in the late 1940's and early 1950's. However, we now have a burgeoning number of studies directed specifically to this issue, as reviewed by Bowers (1973); and, very recently, Sarason, Smith, and Diener (1975) surveyed studies incidentally pertinent to it. The latter studies in particular, in contrast to those emphasized by Bowers, are theoretically the more compelling because the person variables employed are previously measured individual differences in subjects, as opposed to being merely between and within- (unselected) subject effects upon exposure to various situations. As recently noted by Golding (1975), person-by-situation interaction effects in the latter type of study, taken by themselves, are theoretically ambiguous and are conceivably artifactual to a large but unknown extent. Incidentally, Golding has also convincingly questioned the appropriateness of the Omega-squared statistic used by both Bowers and Sarason et al. in estimating the relative magnitudes of interaction and main effects. Nevertheless, interaction effects retain a relative robustness independent of this particular mode of assessment. Thus, of a sample of 53 recently published studies employing both situational and individual difference variables, Sarason et al. note that the interaction term was significant in 59.9% of them. The comparable percentages for the main effects of situations and individual differences were 65.5 and 31.0, respectively. Given the attainable precision of situational as opposed to individual differences control in psychological experiments, the fact that significant interactions occur very nearly as often as situational main effects is a resounding testimony to their potency.

Let us accept the [illegible], then, that neither dispositional nor situational influences on behavior are monolithically determinative, and that such influence as they both have is not, by and large, merely independent and additive in character, although it can be. This point is acknowledged by Mischel (1973), at least in his most recent statements, and, of course, it is championed and celebrated by Bowers (1973) in his generally devastating critique of situationism in human psychology, where Mischel's earlier formulations (1968, 1969, 1971) were taken as one of the principal targets. Both of these protagonists, as well as other pertinent investigators, acknowledge the fact that, in principle, it would not be difficult to devise studies to produce any set of results one desired on this issue, but that in the normal course of things interaction is to be expected. On careful examination, in fact, it turns out that both of these authors are saying pretty much the same things about the empirical relationships in question, although Bowers may be at least partly correct in ascribing this apparent agreement to recent shifts in Mischel's position. The heart of the matter, theoretically speaking, is the interpretation placed upon these notably frequent occurrences of person-by-situation interactions.

The matter of interpretation is not unequivocal. Bowers (1973) himself has noted that the empirical robustness of the interaction term can be, and sometimes has been, interpreted as supporting either personalism or situationism. Thus, the staunch situationist can argue that the salience of empirical interactions merely reflects the divergent and unique conditioning histories of individuals, such that similar behaviors across persons are evoked and maintained by differing stimulus circumstances, and that phentoypically similar stimulus circumstances sometimes give rise to differential behaviors depending, again, on idiosyncratic

reinforcement histories of individuals. Similarly, the personologist or trait theorist may argue that there is a certain situational specificity to the expression of stable dispositional tendencies. Bowers, I think justifiably, eschews both of these rather general formulations in favor of a direct interpretation of the implicated interactions in largely perceptual-cognitive terms. Mischel (1973) is somewhat equivocal. On the one hand he speaks of the "idiosyncratic organization of behavior," an idea entirely compatible with the foregoing situationist interpretation, although, as Golding (1975) notes, possibly forecasting a certain infinitely unique and hopelessly unsystematic process across persons. In this connection, Bowers ironically notes, and Mischel favorably comments on, the possibilities of idiographic study within a situationist context, surely a startling juxtaposition for those of us brought up in the traditional ideologies.

On the other hand, however, the main weight of Mischel's 1973 "cognitive social learning reconceptualization of personality" is that of proposing a series of "basic units" of personality organization sharing the dual properties of: (1) being highly cognitive-perceptual in nature, and (2) potentially accounting for person-by-situation interactions in precisely those terms--that is, essentially in the same terms as advocated by Bowers and <u>not</u> merely as gratuitous Skinnerian mental way-stations mediating between the supposedly "real" events of stimuli and responses. I need only name these proposed units here to remind you of their general nature: (1) cognitive and behavioral construction competencies, (2) encoding strategies and personal constructs, (3) behavior-outcome and stimulus-outcome expectancies, (4) subjective stimulus values, and (5) self-regulatory systems and plans. Thus have organismic variables found their way back into a psychology of personality bizzarely dominated in recent years by

views which excluded the person, as lamented, for example, by Carlson (1971).

It goes without saying that the most important "situations" encountered by persons in their daily living consist of other people and their behaviors, particularly those behaviors that are directed or oriented toward the subject-person. To a large extent, then, the essential things we need to understand, accepting Bowers' and Mischel's common analyses, concern the manner in which persons perceive, construe, subjectively quantify, etc., the signals coming to them from other persons in their life-space. This is the issue on which I want especially to focus. There is another sense in which the person may be said to create his own situations, as emphasized recently by Wachtel (1973) as well as Bowers. That is, by behaving in such a way as to control thereby the real-world situations with which he is characteristically faced. I do not want to suggest by neglect that I regard such processes as unimportant. On the contrary, I have myself analyzed them extensively in an earlier work (Carson, 1969), and I shall return to them briefly at the end of this paper. For now, however, I want to delve somewhat more deeply, although necessarily also briefly, into the matter of possible idiosyncracies among persons in their construing of other people and their behavior. This seems an equally promising, although in some ways neglected, means of understanding person-by-situation--that is, largely, person-as-subject-by-person-as-object--interaction in the determination of complex social behavior. In interpersonal processes, of course, this subject-object distinction is simultaneously bi-directional, which is only one of many intimidating complexities.

The basic ideas here are by no means new. At the level of broad theory we have the examples of Kurt Lewin, Harry Stack Sullivan and George Kelly, among others. And we have a very substantial empirical literature in the area of person

perception. It is my view, however, that the largest part of this past conceptual and empirical output has suffered from a pervasive, and altogether quite crippling, deficiency; to wit, conceptual and methodological naivete occasioned in turn by a failure to seriously engage the difficult, perplexing philosophical and epistemological anomalies that abound when one self seeks to know another as self. This is the rock of intersubjectivity on which Edmund Husserl foundered in his attempt to construct a systematic phenomenology.

This is not the place to examine at the philosophical level the still unresolved phenomenological problem of intersubjectivity, which is perhaps fortunate given the present author's level of competence to do so. However, the central problem for a psychology of person perception can be readily identified, as it has been, for example, by Ichheiser (1970). It is simply that one cannot experience the experience of another. And in this respect we psychologists are in the same boat as the persons whose relationships with others we wish to study. As is well known, this dilemma can be pushed to some fairly grim conclusions about human relationships generally, as Sartre (1965) has abundantly demonstrated. And, incidentally, classical behaviorism in psychology had its own Sartrean bent, insofar as it ruled out of existence by fiat the possible consciousness of its experimental subjects.

Of course, psychologists can, and for the most part nowadays do, operate on the assumption that other persons have mental lives more or less comparable to their own. We are all supported in this assumption by the fact that, as we listen to other people report their intractably private experiences, almost entirely in what is certain to be a very constrained linguistic mode, by the way, we rarely encounter as we decode these verbal signals anything unfamiliar in

terms of our own private experiences, which, if verbally encoded, become similarly deprived of their inherent subtlety, precision and richness. Indeed, if we do hear such unfamiliar things from particular others we tend to generate a variety of more or less pejorative attributions about the functional integrity of their mental apparatuses, however conceived. And we're aware that others might do the same to us should we depart too far from the conventional pap in reporting our mental contents. In any event, we mostly satisfy ourselves that we can have adequate access to the experiential world of others, and rather easily at that, by, as Mischel (1973) asserts, merely asking them about it. But can we? And if we can is it really this simple, methodologically speaking? I am much less certain of an unqualified affirmative answer to these questions than I once was.

A beloved former colleague of mine, the late Karl Zener, has analyzed at length in the Koch series (Zener & Gaffron, 1962) just how difficult it is going to be to devise an adequate methodology for the study of private experience, and Zener was concerned primarily with relatively simple "stimuli." Here is what he has to say by way of anticipating the problems at the most general level:

> Full acceptance of a focal concern with experiential events implies . . . far-reaching reorientation of conceptual thinking and research effort. It would certainly require development of a much more adequate terminology; a more adequate analysis of the perceptual processes of observation and the linguistic processes of report required to achieve sufficient scientific objectivity; and finally, a much more detailed determination of the role played by experiential properties in the causal context of the "behavioral" aspects of organism-environment interaction. That this would also require a more searching analysis of the descriptive and conceptual properties of the "behavioral" phases of the interaction than has been customary is evident. (p. 521)

Zener places quotation marks around the term "behavioral" in the above statement to signify that he means by it just about everything that happens

following the occurrence of raw experience. In short, Zener's program calls for making public and explicit the qualities of mental life that up to now have remained in the realm of the private, the inarticulable and the ineffable. He describes the scientific task as an arduous one, and his detailed analysis compellingly depicts it to be so. From this perspective, to expect the phenomenologically or introspectively untrained research subject to provide an adequate account of mental processes attendant to his relating to others, and of the relationship of those processes to his actions in such encounters, is tantamount to indulging in futility. One is reminded in this connection of the decline and fall of so-called verbal conditioning as investigators increasingly probed into the private experiences of subjects undergoing the procedure (Spielberger & DeNike, 1966). It is apparent that an understanding of person-by-situation (or -by person) interactions in perceptual and cognitive terms is not going to be purchased cheaply by psychology, notwithstanding the fact that in many ways it is our central task as psychologists.

If individual differences in personality, as reflected in significant social behavior, are reducible in substantial degree to differences in experiencing, perceiving, and cognizing reality, then this is where we should be placing a greater proportion of our investigative bets. In the area of psychopathology, for example, we should be paying more attention than is customary to a fine-grained and subtle analysis of the phenomenal universe of persons exhibiting various forms of behavioral aberration, as indeed has been urged by the Rogerians, especially Gendlin (1964), and by many of those identified with an existential position. If behavioral aberration is due at least in part to correspondent aberrations in the way the world is construed, as Kelly (1955) would have it,

then the direct approach to therapy would involve an attempt to modify these aberrant mental representations, not the client's behavior. Thus, there is accumulated evidence from various sources (Leary, 1957; Moos, 1968; Raush, 1965; Raush et al., 1960) that disturbed persons are less situationally specific in their behavior than are the nondisturbed; indeed, this statement itself may be something of a tautology. Translating, then, the phenomenal world of the disturbed person may be less differentiated than that of the nondisturbed, in which case therapy, in general, becomes a matter of cognitive discrimination training. It is ironic that Dollard and Miller (1950), in their influential "learning theory" reinterpretation of Freud of 25 years ago, emphasized something very close to this as a principal ingredient of psychotherapy.

But, in the final analysis, these ideas are themselves oversimplified in several ways. Most importantly, the relations between phenomenal experience and behavior are not, in fact, unidirectional. If a person creates his own subjective world via perceptual and cognitive processes, then his behavior as fashioned in accord with these processes also affects the real world in ways that control the input to those same processes (Powers, 1973). In this manner, then, person-environment relations become circular and truly interactional in yet another sense of the word. They also become very perplexing if one's purpose is to discover antecedents and consequences.

Take, for example, the individual who construes the interpersonal world as hostile and dangerous. He enacts interpersonal behaviors appropriate to that construction, that is, actively or passively aggressive ones, and--lo and behold--other persons exhibit genuinely hostile behaviors toward him, thus confirming in objective events his peculiar view of the world. Such self-fulfilling prophecies

afford a promising means, in fact, of accounting for the seeming persistence and continuity of individual personality, as suggested by Kelley and Stahelsky (1970), among others. But, how did our hypothetical individual come to construe the world as hostile and dangerous in the first place? Others were mean to him at an early age? If so, why? There is here the possibility of temporal regression which, if not infinite, goes back to some fairly dark places. I am not at all sure that it is helpful in this area to think of antecedents and consequences. Rather, what seems to be required is that we recognize and understand in as much detail as possible the ongoing circularity. Psychotherapy, then, might reasonably be directed at altering any of the principal classes of elements involved in its maintenance: the client's constructions of the world, including himself as intentional object, his mode of behaving in the world, or indeed the behaviors he characteristically elicits in significant others. One might expect that the most efficient interventions will be those that include a coordinated program of interruption and substitution at all three points. So far as I know, none of the currently popular systems of therapy attempt explicitly to do so.

And, because the relationships involved are exceedingly subtle and complex, it will not be easy to fashion such a therapy. However, as Zener (Zener & Gaffron, 1962) suggested in connection with the study of experience, "first things should come first; arduousness is not itself a valid reason for regarding any significant task as unachievable" (p. 521). By Zener's standards, however, the psychology of personality (and of inter-personality) has thus far barely scratched its own surface.

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